

Interviewer: You mean, what, there used to be a lot of fighting and stuff?

Willie Epps: Oh yeah, used to be a lot of fighting, right? They used to run them off of these jobs [inaudible] normal work. There used to be a time you come up here on a coal train, or [inaudible] -- there used to be four or five trains in here a day. Every day you come up here on a passenger train one of them thugs would not let you leave that passenger train.

Interviewer: What were they looking for?

Willie Epps: To see who you was, where you going to, where you were going. You know, folks used to come here to organize these people. And it used to be -- you'll take a train, you know come up here on these trains you get a chance like [inaudible]. And I'd have -- you can tell me to meet me outside so I say, "We want to come on and talk to you." ~~And right~~ Tomorrow night? [Inaudible] the miners and [inaudible]. Well you see call that organized. I can get around here and I tell them, "Now you going to have \_\_\_\_\_ tomorrow night, and I'd like you to [inaudible]. And I would like so many \_\_\_\_\_." And I'd listen to this man talk.

Well now I can get a hold of him [inaudible]. Now you all ain't working for the mine. Says, "You all be so and so and so and so. You can get together and organize this place, [inaudible] organize it, you can get together and organize, get things started on started on and [inaudible], get this and get that." Well, you see, a crowd would gang up there, well now next time they have a meeting [inaudible] you have twice as many, you see? And here the same many you talk. And then you had back and forth, you know, We had \_\_\_\_\_ John L. Lewis \_\_\_\_\_ he could have. Well now the first thing you know you got a big bunch -- you got 75, 80 or 200 men is organizing. Well now when you get a crowd like that you get a little scared because \_\_\_\_\_, but you ain't scared nobody come in here and beat me up. Before you know you got 500 men. Now they can go ahead and organize themselves then, go over there and get them a shop.

Well now these backed up because [crosstalk] --

Interviewer: [Crosstalk].

Willie Epps: Yeah, yeah, you get him a job, see? Well [inaudible] is so strong he can't do nothing with you because you too strong.

*Interviewer:* Did they ever try to fire people off or do lock – lock people out of the mines and stuff?

*Willie Epps:* Yeah, they try to run us off; they put chains across the roads and everything, stop them from coming in. I ain't never thought there'd be chains across that road, chaining that road coming up yonder, chain them out. Wouldn't let the vehicles pass across them lines. A fellow in a truck, he couldn't get through that cause have the roadblock. He owned it all.

*Interviewer:* Huh.

*Willie Epps:* Couldn't get in here. If you walk in here you couldn't be but one of two coming at a time. And I know a time you couldn't get off that passenger train but there was somebody be there to talk to you.

*Interviewer:* Huh.

*Willie Epps:* Oh, buddy said, now when you get off the diner he ask you, say, "Hey, how you do? Come on, son." Brace yourself, you go talk to him, says, "You got kinfolk here?" You tell him, "No." "Yeah, but what is your business here? I see you coming and getting high, no doubt." He said, "Well, I just traveling, man." "You ain't tell me you huntin' work. Where you from?" "Well now if you from anyplace over yonder, where they have organized labor, you better join a bread gang or do something because you won't going to stay here. You going up river, and they wouldn't allow me to take you in. Well you could be my kindred come to organized people I wasn't allowed to take you in. *[Inaudible]*."

*Interviewer:* Well where were people coming from? From Kanawha or --?

*Willie Epps:* Yeah, from places, some folks from north, some from Pennsylvania and -- and anywhere there's a coal miner, they like a man hunting job, he can just *[inaudible]*. Some of them just be ordinary men. You know, they come and organize, you know, they paying. Organize labor was paying a whole lot, them organizers. And the company was paying the thugs to run you away from there, that the way it went. You have fellas didn't do nothing well but toeing up sticking up pistols. You couldn't *[crosstalk]* –

*Interviewer:* Would the thugs be from here or were they hired from somewhere else?

*Willie Epps:* No, they'd be from this part here. They're be raised – these superintendents children and grandchildren. Them the thugs. And

they was dirty men who could pick up, you know, to a —packing protect the company. No, you – get somebody, anytime you can find somebody to do dirty work, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: You pay them so much a day, a week, but you never walk around and do that [inaudible] hard talking, you know he going to do it. And he'd look for you at night. You couldn't get in here.

I remember the time you sold me [inaudible] behind that mine, it's called Mother Jones Hollow.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Willie Epps: And used to be old camp set over there. And used to lead this camp, Lillybrook Camp and Whitney Camp. That where they used to hold the meetings at old down them woods – right by Wildwoods. Got holding meetings, organizing.

Interviewer: Why'd they call it Mother Jones Camp?

Willie Epps: Well she was a labor leader.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: Mother Jones was a leader lady, a labor leader, and she used to come in here and lead these [crosstalk].

Interviewer: Oh she used to come into camp?

Willie Epps: Yeah, she'd come all around in here, all down in all these fields. She been in all these hollows in these coal veins.

She was a labor leader. That's just a leader – oh, I guess she was a whole lot better leader than John L. Lewis and them fellows. She just was a real labor leader showed up, and folks fell for her. You can go anywhere now, any of these old camps, running some of these old fellows, they'll tell you about Mother Jones. She was a real woman. Yeah. And the whole camp, [inaudible] at night, over yonder in them hollow, the Mother Jones Hollow, they called it. She been in that old camp many, many times.

Interviewer: And they held the meetings in Lillybrook?

*Willie Epps:* That where they used to hold the meetings in. And old Mother Jones Hollow and even that old camp, old log camp, log [inaudible] little lodge houses, they called it Mother Jones Hollow.

*Interviewer:* And the company wouldn't find out?

*Willie Epps:* As long as they didn't – they didn't go down on that bunch of the men, now you ain't going to get no one or two men to come and hide to go around there at night, after you got in there. Because you was scared.

*Interviewer:* Yeah.

*Willie Epps:* Take some of them daggone them old [inaudible] with high-powered rifles. They could see – they could shoot them a mile and see. Yeah, you don't want to stick your head in nothing now in the dark or nothing like that because they was scared of you.

*Interviewer:* And, what, when the government said it was okay to organize?

*Willie Epps:* To organize and all smooth, got along fine. Oh, you'd have a little rap every now and then but them – the leaders over there, you'd take old Phil Park, old Howard Gibson, all them old fellows, well old Tipton was a pretty good man, United Mineworker. He'd been working now with Tony \_\_\_\_\_, you know. But he was a pretty good man.

*Interviewer:* What, George Tipton?

*Willie Epps:* Yeah, he was a good mining man like that. Good man. He stood up for his rights with United Mineworkers at that time. Good man. Harry Gibson, Phil Park, Eric Scott, all them mineworkers, leaders. Heroes over this side. Now you know the leaders on the other side, by over yonder by [inaudible] they were leaders.

*Interviewer:* Was there any trouble between the black and the white miners back in [crosstalk]?

*Willie Epps:* No, we got along fine. From the time this started got along fine. They never had no problem with white and black together. We worked in the mine like brothers. That was the only place you did get along with like brothers, just like brothers in the mines. You white and I was black you want drinking water, your water run out or something you can come to my bank and get a drink of water, quick as I would to your'n or quicker. That's where you swear a lot of white folk working the mine with us black folk around here. It

didn't make a bit of *[inaudible]* like you did. You see? But that was time and time it take *[crosstalk]*. Mm-hmm. Yeah. Never got along bad with the white and colored. Not any *[inaudible]* in West Virginia. I don't know how the other states were, but West Virginia got along good.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Are there a lot of young black men going into the mines now?

*Willie Epps:* No, they ain't going. The one thing buddy, tell you what happened. *[Inaudible]* come with the – civil rights, to over the line. Now used to hire a whole lot of black folk to go in the mine until the civil rights coming by. But this civil rights come by, folk go to paying attention to the *[inaudible]*. The old operators wouldn't give black folks no jobs. There was a whole lot of black folks in pension today. So the white operators they wanted to keep the black man down so bad, to tell you truthfully, they wouldn't give him no job, when the work dirty get done. And that caused a lot of this confusion going on right now.

*Interviewer:* Yeah?

*Willie Epps:* Old white man around yonder, he wouldn't give a black man no job on the call to keep him on the book.

*Interviewer:* Laid him off.

*Willie Epps:* Yeah, and it just broke – it's shot \_\_\_\_\_. It broke the other way. It got so then every time a man get a little disabled or something to work he'd get his pension. And that broke from under him; he didn't know what to say about that. A whole lot of white folk I know come along with me and long my age, died and couldn't get that pension because why? His color was white, and he keeping that job and pension longer than he should have been when they should have been in the hospital or something now, and he couldn't do nothing because he messed him up by keeping him in a little work job, a little boss or something solid like that, when the man ought to be been out another job, working where he could have got a hospital and good pension and got his pension and stuff, good work maybe ten years before the day he die.

*Interviewer:* Did work him down?

*Willie Epps:* And then he got working so he wasn't asking for no pension nothing. I know a lot of white fellows right now is old enough for pension but the way the company kept them along and drove them

along he not eligible for pension. Well he was a little boss or something, you see? United Mineworkers \_\_\_\_ they don't pension bosses.

*Interviewer:* Oh, so they'd just promote them at the last moment?

*Willie Epps:* Yeah, something like that. That give him something. And he is a miner and got bylaws he can get something. He don't never give none to the United Mineworkers or none of that. Don't never give nothing.

*Interviewer:* That's pretty clever, yeah.

*Willie Epps:* Yeah, that's where the trouble put it. Now yeah, long about the last the last – you take the last years I worked, man, got another job, that's – you know, that civil rights was going on, you know. Giving the negro a chance to come up, you know, he want to keep him down, you see? He always have one step *[inaudible]* just so he could make him do what he wanted to do. And whenever that happened, you *[inaudible]* you couldn't get a job. You working for one of these coal mines, you see shooting before you get to the mine you get to the mine, a little Johnny Lavourne say, "He gone. He won't be back since the time. He be back maybe next week, Wednesday or Thursday or Friday." And the man be – and all the *[inaudible]*. But he won't give you no job no-how. I know what I'm talking about. More miners tell you the same thing.

*Interviewer:* Yeah?

*Willie Epps:* The operators got awful trashy. But, you see, you know, you want to keep him down; you always have had him down to a certain extent, you know, and they want to keep him down. Nothing he can do to me. I don't mind. And there again, when I was working in the mine at that time I tell them when he get to me I said, "Now you treat me wrong," I said, "But I can't help myself." Now you take it right now, you can walk to the coal mine now, there's 75 and 80 and ~~however~~ higher than 100, ~~work~~ white folks organize, you don't see no black faces there.

*Interviewer:* Huh.

*Willie Epps:* *[Inaudible]*.

*Interviewer:* Well they don't want *[crosstalk]* and made it hard for the --

Willie Epps: They made it hard for him and they want to go to him now something or somebody, so I don't know what it is. But you hardly ever find any of them at the mines dealing in coal, before they really wander into the city and get a job, go on the road.

Interviewer: They'd rather go to the city.

Willie Epps: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did your children go to the city?

Willie Epps: Yeah, all my boys went to the city. I got – well, I got two boys, one in DC and I got one working [inaudible]. I got two girls; I got one in New York City and one in Washington. So all my girls is – no, my other girl – yeah, I got two girls. One girl in Washington and one here; she's in Head Start School, and my three boys is in the city.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Willie Epps: And I could have made them miners, but if these coal operators had cooperated right each one of my boys would have been right here right now, \_\_\_\_\_ or more. Take different [inaudible]. This absolutely would not give a boy nothing to do. Wouldn't give a boy nothing to do. You raise a boy here and he's 20-25 years old he wouldn't get no job. I know I tell the truth, I ain't saying nothing. He wouldn't get in there.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: "No, we can't hire him. We ain't go no place, boy. And you go out today, he ain't got no place for your boy, you a black man; he ain't got now a place for your boy. You go back out tomorrow; he going to hire three white fellows." But it the same mine. But they ain't got no black people. You go around here some of these old jobs around the back of these old stores and things. You can educate your boy to get out, to get out, get a high- get a college education. He ain't got no job don't care how high, but tomorrow he got a white fellow that don't know half as much as this boy do but he give him a job. He owned everything first and you can't get – he going to get. You take white folk own everything. I tell them any time I knew get you get to talking I said, "Well you all own everything." I said, "We ain't got nothing." I said, "Whatever we got we have to get it in through by you." And I tell them that in a minute. Well that's [inaudible]. I ain't going to tell no lie boy, it's the truth.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's true.

Do you think they're going to have trouble getting young miners?

Willie Epps: I don't believe they'll ever really get young black miners in the mines no more. It should be a long time that ever – that I ever really did \_\_\_\_ young black miners and [inaudible] and thing like grow up and working where he is now. So you take any of these black miners who are sitting now and give them a job. And you get good ones. I mean driving truck and buses and everything else. And they'll tell you you can't get it. Can't get it. [Inaudible]. I been trying to get my boy back, all from all kind of writing, and anything I could do for him I'd do it. [Inaudible] he say, "No Dad, you worked yourself to death with that. I ain't going to." He say, "Don't never put me ~~supposed to be doing~~ though no coal mining." Say, "I ain't going in there." I ain't never had one boy [inaudible] like he was going into mining that [inaudible] boy \_\_\_\_ school. But at the time he wanted to go in the mine I had come up the mine, and I wouldn't trust to make nobody because I had to learn the mine myself. And this mechanical work, the way that you young miners, white ones, black ones, you ain't – they ain't got nobody leading them. You used to have a time you couldn't put a youngster in the mine to without some old man was over him.

Interviewer: Was over him, yeah.

Willie Epps: he had chance to – and then he couldn't get a mining certificate for this old man to say he was qualified they didn't give him a miner certificate. And then they gave him a miner certificate. But now they come and take him in. All they want is a whole lot of coal. And he get killed get dead but he ain't never [inaudible]. I'm telling you right, that's all you want now. Because [inaudible] was hiring a man like this.

Interviewer: Yeah they'll hire – just almost anybody today. They had that one explosion up at Blackstone, and some of the men had been killed that had only been in the mines two weeks and never had no classes or anything else.

Willie Epps: The problem is, man, you ain't go no business now. Now when I first come in the coal mine my brother-in-law was here. It used to be another colored fellow and his name was W.L. Brown. And them three men used to come to my place two and three times a day, checking on me, see how was I -- see if I was going to get hurt or whatnot.



[Off mic conversation to 0:17:50]

Willie Epps: Yeah, they didn't let no man, no boy go in there, mess around, didn't know. Looked over [inaudible]. And at that time the compensation lady come to pay for a man [inaudible]. The man that got hurt or got killed, he didn't get much the company had to pay. But here lately I [inaudible]. I know a fellow get killed in the mine dadgummit. Right around about ten o'clock in the day and wasn't cause; you wouldn't know who got killed until night bringing on mining trip; wouldn't even know it. And the law that always a man get killed or badly hurt in the mine you -- see that's the shift for that day. He coming back at 3:00 you wouldn't even [inaudible].

Interviewer: Wouldn't stop the shift?

Willie Epps: [Inaudible]. I tell you, now coal mine, you can't -- white mining needs a whole lot of attention because there ain't very many black men in the mine. You'll get a black boy now [audio interference] even possible. You see these mines, you see how they -- after you get some education you can see more every black person you getting now got a good education. Back there when I come along you didn't have none. But now you take a black boy --

Interviewer: Yeah, college and everything.

Willie Epps: He got the good education that the white man saw, and he know. And he -- they'll get [inaudible] sit and talk about. And they'll talk well the mine so. You can understand but I couldn't. So he's talking about what I know. Now you take my boys and come right there, right now, all them finish high school and some of them college. But now they can sit down and talk things, I just well me I don't know what he's talking about. Nothing about. But you can still -- he got proof. He got books and things for -- he [inaudible], so and so and so and so. Far as I know he done been around the book on the mine knows he [inaudible] right there [inaudible] wouldn't tell him, but it's so. [Inaudible] now. He's smart.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: And take a whole lot of them. Very smart fellows. No, you'll never get the black man in this country, nothing like it used to be. No mine he ain't going to get in. He just too -- the world is too wide open for him. It's too much going for him. He don't care, he can drive a bus, he can drive a big transport truck, he can get up there

and sit at his desk and do like that other boy. You can't dog him around no more. *[Inaudible]*.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. I guess that's true.

*Willie Epps:* It is. It is true. And you get done, I don't – I know the times, as well as rich as some parts of West Virginia so am I, I don't care how much cash – I can't even buy a home there. To go and do something and not be able to buy a home. Well I got the cash. I can't buy that home now. For a while you don't want you job; you don't want to buy that.

*Interviewer:* Yeah.

*Willie Epps:* But since this law passed now if I got the cash --

*Interviewer:* They got to.

*Willie Epps:* -- I can come pretty near *[inaudible]*. I can get a loan. And finally where I can buy whatever these I can buy. If it's for sale I can buy it. Now *[inaudible]* can't put a sale sign on it.

*Interviewer:* Yeah.

*Willie Epps:* Now he ain't got a sale sign on it it's private property or something, I guess – that's something else. But if there's a for sale sign on it I can get probably to borrow that in cash. He might burn it down or burn me up, but I can buy it. But it didn't used to be like that. See, he'll tell you ~~know~~-no, wouldn't sell it to you or – but you go and live life. Used to be like that.

*Interviewer:* Yeah.

*Willie Epps:* Bad stuff.

*Interviewer:* Yeah, I hear that's true. I mean from everything I've heard from *[crosstalk]* --

*Willie Epps:* Yeah, well now listen, you ain't got to believe me, you go and talk to some more of these older folks.

*Interviewer:* Yeah, I know, things are really changing fast, and I guess it's --

*Willie Epps:* Oh, just who all be living the next 18-20 years it's going to be like a new world. After this war, though, now after this war, though, we going to straighten it up sure enough, when the war come – when

the fellows cut out this war, yeah. When this war ends we going to  
straighten it out.

*[Off mic conversation 0:22:46 to end]*

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